

## ISSUES

# It's Been Five Years Since the Devastating Earthquake: Please Don't Forget Haiti

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KELLI DUNHAM · JAN 12, 2015

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In an argument, if the other party accuses me of having "more optimism than common sense," I cannot in good conscience disagree.

Thus, I assumed that plenty would be written in the mainstream media about the five-year anniversary of the earthquake in Haiti:

- The earthquake that took so many lives (250,000? 300,000?) that even the best estimates are just that, estimates.
- The earthquake that largely destroyed the country's already struggling infrastructure.
- The earthquake that was followed by a cholera epidemic believed to be caused by careless aid workers.

The Haitian earthquake was an event that the mainstream media initially *could not stop talking about*, even if the conversation was gross and obnoxious: overflowing with the word *squalor*, never talking to actual Haitian people, ignoring completely the worldwide colonialist policies that devastated the country long before the day the ground shook, using the word *looting* and the term *lawless gangs* when they should have said "hungry people looking for food."

Surely, I thought, all those mainstream media outlets would send reporters back, five years later to cover the progress and the sometimes lack of recovery that has taken place.

Um. Nope.

On January 12, 2015 many of us who have the luxury to do so have forgotten January 12, 2010.

If you've spent five minutes with me at a casual cocktail party, you know I will rant about the earthquake in Haiti with absolutely no provocation. In fact, once in a conversation about polyamory, a partner observed, "I think we're pretty much a triad already, right? Me, you, and conversations about the earthquake in Haiti?"

True enough.

My first trip to Haiti was in 1987; [I lived in Haiti](#) during my late teens/early twenties, have lived and worked in the Haitian communities of Miami and Brooklyn over the years and returned after the earthquake to volunteer at a field hospital. This means my relationship with Haiti is four times longer than any other romantic relationship I've been in.

Still though, I am an outsider in a country that has had too many outsiders talking about it for way too long. So while it is not within my rights to analyze, I can ask that we remember.

Today, this is who I am remembering:

I remember Kerby, an eight-year-old kid who had a huge thigh wound from being trapped underneath a concrete wall. His mother brought him to the field hospital every day to have the dressing changed. He was silent in his trauma and never cried even when we had to debride the edges of the wound. Later after finishing, I would shed tears for both of us.

Today, please remember Kerby.

I remember Felix, the dorm father at St. Vincent's, a school for kids with orthopedic disabilities where I volunteered in my early years in Haiti. I went back to visit what was left of the school and found that many of the kids died because they were not able to easily evacuate. Even though Felix had lost four brothers in the quake, he stayed at the school to help grieving parents as they came to find their children.

Today, please remember Felix.

I remember Emmanuel, a then five-year-old boy who was stuck under his collapsed house for more than a day until his neighbors heard his cries and dug him out with their bare hands, brick by brick. This was the most common rescue scenario in those early days, something that was completely ignored by the international press that seemed only interested in outsiders' relief efforts. Emmanuel had multiple fractures and lacerations and lost most of his family in the the quake. He is now a tall 10-year-old, living with his grandmother, and doing quite well in school.

Today, please remember Emmanuel.

I remember the Haitian-American college students who I met on my flight from JFK to Santo Domingo. They were headed to find family, using the only way to enter Haiti without access to a private jet; via a flight into the Dominican Republic and then somewhat random ground transport to the other side of the island. They let me tag along with them to find my way and didn't make fun of my lack of a plan, which clearly demonstrated my skewed optimism to common sense ratio.

Many of those students found that their entire extended families were missing. We keep loosely in touch via social media and so I know that three of them are graduating this year; that they all have age-appropriate boyfriend drama and girlfriend drama and their friends tease them about studying too much. And it is clear from their status updates and one word replies to my texts that for them, January 12 will never be just another day.

Today, please remember them.

I remember Harold, the 11-year-old son of a longtime friend who was trapped underneath four stories of rubble at his aunt's apartment. He didn't die immediately; his teenager sister who was trapped with him said his last words were, "I have to go to Jesus now. Tell Mommy and Daddy I love them." His sister was severely injured, but has in many ways recovered and just completed her first semester of nursing school. When the time is right, I know she will tell her own story.

Today, please remember Harold.

It would be abhorrent if Haiti were defined by this disaster as some define it only by its poverty. Haiti possesses much beyond its need: amazing art, culture, cuisine, and awe inspiring natural beauty.

But for today, let's remember Harold and Felix and Kerby and Emmanuel in solidarity with those who can never forget.